

FEMA bulks up on supplies, systems for tracking them

By Paul Singer, [National Journal](#)

Nobody knows whether FEMA's response to the next catastrophe will be better than its much-maligned reaction to Hurricane Katrina, but this much is certain: FEMA will bring more stuff to the event.

In their efforts to repair the most-pressing shortcomings exposed by the 2005 hurricane season, officials at the Federal Emergency Management Agency have invested millions of dollars in equipment and supply upgrades to try to ensure a smoother flow of supplies to, and communications at, the site of the next disaster.

State emergency-response officials applaud these investments but warn that the upgrades may have done little to repair underlying flaws in FEMA's operations -- a loss of experienced staff and a strategy that emphasizes federal decision-making in disasters that are primarily local events.

At his swearing-in ceremony on June 8, FEMA Director David Paulison told a roomful of employees: "I know very clearly how hard you've worked; how much time you've put in; the sacrifices you've made, and your families; the beating you've taken from the public." But, he added, "this is a great organization. I've told you before -- you hold your head high. We are going to make America proud of this organization again."

FEMA's first step was to lay in more supplies. The agency says it has on hand 770 truckloads of Meals Ready to Eat, 1,540 trucks of water, and 2,030 truckloads of ice. Before Katrina, FEMA had 180 meal trucks, 600 water trucks, and 430 loads of ice.

The federal government is also offering to pre-position truckloads of emergency supplies in states that sign an agreement that they will not open the caches until a federal emergency has been declared. Earlier this month, FEMA reported that 13 states, including Florida, Louisiana, and Texas, had received or were about to receive the supplies.

But increased quantities of supplies are useful only if they can get to where they are needed. To prevent a repeat of stories of trucks loaded with ice and other supplies cooling their wheels for days in depots outside Louisiana, FEMA bought a \$20 million system that will put individual satellite tracking devices on 20,000 supply trucks. At the touch of a button, a manager at a response center will be able to see the exact location of each truck. When the supplies are delivered, the tracking unit can be removed and attached to another load.

Paulison said that FEMA has purchased sophisticated satellite telephone systems, portable cell towers, and mobile video units to improve communication among first responders in the event that a storm destroys land-based phone and power lines.

The agency has overhauled its system for tracking hurricane victims and providing assistance to individuals. FEMA officials said that in the wake of Katrina, they had no idea how to locate victims who scattered across the country. Federal agencies relied in some cases on information from private charities about where evacuees were housed, and had little ability to verify their eligibility for assistance. The Government Accountability Office reported earlier this month that FEMA had made as much as \$1.4 billion in payments to people who were not eligible for disaster assistance.

FEMA disputed the report's findings and accused the GAO of giving prominent play to a few isolated -- if embarrassing -- incidents of fraud. But the agency has a new computer registration system that will automatically weed out duplicate payments and verify the Social Security numbers and addresses of applicants.

And FEMA is reducing the amount of cash it will hand out for emergency relief. After Katrina, the agency distributed as much as \$2,000 to homeless victims to address immediate needs; in any upcoming disaster, such emergency relief will likely be limited to about \$500.

On top of these technological and logistical improvements, the federal government has spent the winter revising response plans and improving coordination among responding agencies, in hopes of clarifying roles and responsibilities during a disaster. At the end of May, the Department of Homeland Security published a 50-page volume of amendments to the National Response Plan, including provisions to ensure that emergency-response agencies all operate out of a single command facility, called the Joint Field Office.

DHS also enters this hurricane season with about 50 presigned agreements with other federal agencies to provide resources -- such as helicopters, medical assistance teams, or base camps for first responders -- in the event of an emergency, four times the number that were in place when Katrina struck. These agreements mean that disaster coordinators won't have to scramble in the immediate aftermath to figure out who can provide resources and under what authority the help can be ordered and paid for.

Several state emergency-response officials applauded FEMA for these efforts but voiced lingering concern about whether any of it will make a difference.

"Do I think FEMA is as equipped and as talented and as service-oriented as they were three years ago? No. No way," said Albert Ashwood, director of emergency management for Oklahoma and the incoming president of the National Emergency Management Association.

He said that when FEMA was moved into the Department of Homeland Security, a layer of bureaucracy was added to the government's emergency-response system. The change has slowed assistance to states and diverted attention from fairly frequent storms and crises to once-in-a-lifetime catastrophes.

Ashwood noted that it took FEMA several weeks to respond to his request for a disaster declaration for Oklahoma counties struck by wildfires in December, far longer than in past disasters. "I thought it was really bad," he said. "I didn't know who to talk to. In the past, if I talked to the director of FEMA, I got an answer. Now it was like, 'Well, we have to check that out with six or seven other people, and legal has to check it out and see what we can and cannot do.' "

And until FEMA approved the disaster designation in mid-January, no federal relief money could flow to the state to help fight the fires or to assist the victims.

"They have made a lot of changes ... but until you test it in a big event, you don't really know" whether the new steps will do any good, said Craig Fugate, director of Florida's Division of Emergency Management. He is skeptical of FEMA's response plans because they center on a large federal role in directing and controlling resources in response to a disaster, instead of putting those resources at the disposal of the state officials in charge of the response.

"In many cases, the state doesn't need the command structure of the federal government -- it needs the resources of the federal government to join that governor's team," Fugate said. For example, while Fugate says that the tracking system for supplies is a good idea, he points out that FEMA has told state officials that they cannot have access to the tracking system for fear that it would make it easier for someone to hijack trucks or cause other havoc.

FEMA plans to run its system and share information with the state, but that offer leaves Fugate unimpressed. "If we do ask for [federal help], we need your stuff. We don't need you to come in and take charge."

Bruce Baughman, director of Alabama's Emergency Management Agency, has more faith in FEMA. "For the state of Alabama, unequivocally, yes, they are much further ahead of the power curve on this one than they were last year. And we are satisfied with their progress," he said.

Although he believes the revisions to the National Response Plan have added unnecessary levels of bureaucracy to disaster management, Baughman said that none of his concerns are "show-stoppers."

But Baughman -- who is the outgoing NEMA president -- echoes Ashwood's fear that federal attention on rare catastrophic events is draining resources from more routine natural disasters. "Alabama gets \$2.9 million a year to prepare for natural disasters," Baughman said, "and \$21 million to prepare for terrorism." Terrorists have never struck the state, "but 30 times in the last 10 years we've been hit by natural disasters."